

Chapter 5

Germania

(98)

Tacitus

Cornelius Tacitus (ca. 56-120) was the greatest of the Roman historians. Little is known of his early life, but he must have come from comfortable surroundings, since he was trained for a public career. He practiced law and moved up the ranks of public service, benefiting from his marriage to the daughter of Julius Agricola, governor of Britain. Elected consul in 97, Tacitus distinguished himself by his oratory. It appears that soon afterward he retired from public life to devote himself to writing, although he served as proconsul of Asia in 112. Both a biographer and a scholar of recent Roman history, Tacitus prepared a biography of his father-in-law as well as his *History*, which ended just before his consulship.

The *Germania* (C.E. 98) was one of Tacitus' earliest works, describing first-hand the customs and characteristics of the Germanic tribes living on the Roman frontier. It remains a principal source for understanding Roman attitudes toward other peoples and for re-creating early Germanic life. *Germania's* description of German society is the most detailed we have before the tribes converted to Christianity, and therefore has often been cited by scholars interested in periods considerably later than when Tacitus wrote.

Questions

1. Tacitus' view of the Germans is that of an outsider looking in. How might his background affect his description?
2. How is German society organized? Who bears authority within it, and how do they achieve power?
3. Why is German society so warlike? What purpose does warfare serve among the Germanic tribes?
4. What is the family life of the Germans like?
5. Implicit in Tacitus' account of the morals of the Germans is a comment on the Romans of his own time. What do you think he is trying to say?

The people of Germany appear to me indigenous, and free from intermixture with foreigners, either as settlers or casual visitants. For the emigrants of former ages performed their expeditions not by land, but by water; and that immense, and, if I may so call it, hostile ocean, is rarely navigated by ships from our world. Then, besides the dangers of a boisterous and unknown sea, who would relinquish Asia, Africa, Italy, for Germany, a land rude in its surface, rigorous in its climate, cheerless to every beholder and cultivator, except a native?

In the election of kings they have regard to birth; in that of generals, to valor. Their kings have not an absolute or unlimited power; and their generals command less through the force of authority than of example. If they are daring, adventurous, and conspicuous in action, they procure obedience from the admiration they inspire. None, however, but the priests are permitted to judge offenders, to inflict bonds or stripes; so that chastisement appears not as an act of

1 military discipline, but as the instigation of the god whom they suppose present with warriors.
2 They also carry with them to battle certain images and standards taken from the sacred groves.

3
4 Tradition relates that armies beginning to give way have been rallied by the females,
5 through the earnestness of the supplications, the interposition of their bodies, and the pictures
6 they have drawn of impending slavery, a calamity which these people bear with more impatience
7 for their women than themselves; so that those states who have been obliged to give among their
8 hostages the daughters of noble families, are the most effectually bound to fidelity. They even
9 suppose somewhat of sanctity and prescience to be inherent in the female sex; and therefore
10 neither despise their counsels, nor disregard their responses. We have beheld, in the reign of
11 Verpasian, Veleda, long revered by many as a deity. Aurima, moreover, and several others,
12 were formerly held in equal veneration, but not with a servile flattery, nor as though they made
13 them goddesses.

14
15 No people are more addicted to divination by omens and lots. The latter is performed in
16 the following simple manner: They cut a twig from a fruit-tree, and divide it into small pieces,
17 which, distinguished by certain marks, are thrown promiscuously upon a white garment. Then,
18 the priest of the canton, if the occasion be public; if private, the master of the family; after an
19 invocation of the gods, with his eyes lifted up to heaven, thrice takes out each piece, and, as they
20 come up, interprets their signification according to the marks fixed upon them. If the result prove
21 unfavorable, there is no more consultation on the same affair that day; if propitious, a
22 confirmation by omens is still required.

23
24 In common with other nations, the Germans are acquainted with the practice of auguring
25 from the notes and flight of birds; but is peculiar to them to drive admonitions and presages from
26 horses also. Certain of these animals, milk-white and untouched by earthly labor, are pastured at
27 the public expense in the sacred woods and groves. These, yoked to a consecrated chariot, are
28 accompanied by the priest, and king, or chief person of the community, who attentively observe
29 their manner of neighing and snorting, and no kind of augury is more credited, not only among
30 the populace, but among the nobles and priests. For the latter consider themselves as the
31 ministers of the gods, and the horses, as privy to the divine will. Another kind of divination, by
32 which they explore the event of momentous wars, is to oblige a prisoner, taken by any means
33 whatsoever from the nation with whom they are at variance, to fight with a picked man of their
34 own, each with his own country's arms; and, according as the victory falls, they presage success
35 to the one or to the other party.

36
37 The Germans transact no business, public or private, without being armed: but it is not
38 customary for any person to assume arms till their state has approved his ability to use them.
39 Then, in the midst of the assembly, either one of the chiefs, or the father, or a relation, equips the
40 youth with a shield and javelin. These are to them the manly gown; this is the first honor
41 conferred on youth; before this they are considered as part of a household: afterward, of the state.
42 The dignity of chieftain is bestowed even on mere lads, whose descent is eminently illustrious, or
43 whose fathers have performed signal services to the public: they are associated, however, with
44 those of mature strength, who have already been declared capable of service; nor do they blush
45 to be seen in the rank of companions. For the state of companionships itself has its several
46 degrees, determined by the judgment of him whom they follow; and there is a great emulation

1 among the companions, which shall possess the highest place in the favor of their chief; and
2 among the chiefs, which shall excel in the number and valor of his companions. It is their
3 dignity, their strength, to be always surrounded with a large body of select youth, an ornament in
4 peace, a bulwark in war. And not in his own country alone, but among the neighboring states, the
5 fame and glory of each chief consists in being distinguished for the number and bravery of his
6 companions. Such chiefs are courted by embassies; distinguished by presents; and often by their
7 reputation alone decide a war.

9 In the field of battle, it is disgraceful for the chief to be surpassed in valor; it is
10 disgraceful for the companions not to equal their chief; but it is reproach and infamy during a
11 whole succeeding life to retreat from the field surviving him. To aid, to protect him; to place
12 their own gallant actions to the account of his glory, is their first and most sacred engagement.
13 The chiefs fight for victory; the companions for their chief. If their native country be long sunk
14 in peace and inaction, many of the young nobles repair to some other state then engaged in war.
15 For, besides that repose is unwelcome to their race, and toils and perils afford them a better
16 opportunity of distinguishing themselves; they are unable, without war and violence, to maintain
17 a large train of followers. The companion requires from the liberality of his chief, the warlike
18 steed, the bloody and conquering spear; and in place of pay he expects to be supplied with a
19 table, homely indeed, but plentiful. The funds for this munificence must be found in war and
20 rapine; nor are they so easily persuaded to cultivate the earth, and await the produce of the
21 seasons, as to challenge the foe, and expose themselves to wounds; nay, they even think it base
22 and spiritless to earn by sweat what they might purchase with blood.

24 During the intervals of war, they pass their time less in hunting than in a sluggish repose,
25 divided between sleep and the table. All the bravest of the warriors, committing the care of the
26 house, the family affairs, and the lands, to the women, old men, and weaker part of the
27 domestics, stupefy themselves in inaction: so wonderful is the contrast presented by nature, that
28 the same persons love indolence, and hate tranquility! It is customary for the several states to
29 present, by voluntary and individual contributions, cattle or grain to their chiefs; which are
30 accepted as honorary gifts, while they serve as necessary supplies. They are peculiarly pleased
31 with presents from neighboring nations, offered not only by individuals, but by the community at
32 large; such as fine horses, heavy armor, rich housing, and gold chains. We have now taught them
33 also to accept of money.

35 It is well known that none of the German nations inhabit cities, or even admit of
36 contiguous settlements. They dwell scattered and separate, as a spring, a meadow, or a grove
37 may chance to invite them. Their villages are laid out, not like ours in rows of adjoining
38 building; but every one surrounds his house with a vacant space, either by way of security
39 against fire, or through ignorance of the art of building. For, indeed, they are unacquainted with
40 the use of mortar and tiles; and for every purpose employ rude unshapen timber, fashioned with
41 no regard to pleasing the eye. They bestow more than ordinary pains in coating certain parts of
42 their buildings with a kind of earth, so pure and shining that it gives the appearance of painting.

44 The dress of the women does not differ from that of the men; except that they more
45 frequently wear linen, which they stain with purple, and do not lengthen their upper garment into
46 sleeves, but leave exposed the whole arm, and part of the breast.

1 The matrimonial bond is, nevertheless, strict and severe among them; nor is there any
2 thing in their manners more commendable than this. Almost singly among the barbarians, they
3 content themselves with one wife; a very few of them excepted, who, not through incontinence,
4 but because their alliance is solicited on account of their rank, practice polygamy. The wife does
5 not bring a dowry to her husband, but receives one from him. The parents and relations
6 assemble, and pass their approbation on the presents – presents not adapted to please a female
7 taste, or decorate the bride; but oxen, a caparisoned steed, a shield, a spear, and sword. By virtue
8 of these, the wife is espoused; and she in her turn makes a present of some arms to her husband.
9 This they consider as the firmest bond of union; these, the sacred mysteries, the conjugal deities.
10 That the woman may not think herself excused from exertions of fortitude, or exempt from the
11 casualties of war, she is admonished by the very ceremonial of her marriage, that she comes to
12 her husband as a partner in toils and dangers; to suffer and to dare equally with him, in peace and
13 in war; this is indicated by the yoked oxen, the harnessed steed, the offered arms. Thus she is to
14 live; thus to die. She receives what she is to return inviolate and honored to her children; what
15 her daughters-in-law are to receive, and again transmit to her grandchildren.

16
17 They live, therefore, fenced around with chastity, corrupted by no seductive spectacles,
18 no convivial incitements. Men and women alike are unacquainted with clandestine
19 correspondence. Adultery is extremely rare among so numerous a people. Its punishment is
20 instant, and at the pleasure of the husband. He cuts off the hair of the offender, strips her, and in
21 the presence of her relations expels her from his house, and pursues her with stripes through the
22 whole village. Nor is any indulgence shown to a prostitute. Neither beauty, youth, nor riches can
23 procure her a husband; for none there looks on vice with a smile, or calls mutual seduction the
24 way of the world. Still more exemplary is the practice of those states in which none but virgins
25 marry, and the expectations and wishes of a wife are at once brought to a period. Thus, they take
26 one husband as one body and one life; that no thought, no desire, may extend beyond him; and
27 he may be loved not only as their husband, but as their marriage. To limit the increase of
28 children, or put to death any of the later progeny, is accounted infamous: and good habits have
29 there more influence than good laws elsewhere.